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ABSTRACT

The Seattle School District has experienced a steady enrollment decline over the last decade or more. Yet even when total revenues and revenue dollars per child are expressed in 1967 dollars, it is clear that the number of dollars spent per child on education is increasing. This is partially because it is not possible to reduce staff members as fast as enrollments decline and partially because special programs have increased. Also, over the same period, the amount of floor space has not been reduced to keep pace with the decreasing number of students. In 1975 the state of Washington was ordered by the courts to fulfill its constitutional duty of funding the full costs of basic education. The resulting basic education law prescribes length of school day and permissible student/teacher ratios. Numbers of staff must be reduced, which means that school closures, although unpopular, will be inevitable. (Author/JM)

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DECLINING ENROLLMENTS--RISING PROBLEMS

REPORT NO. 79-10
JULY 1979

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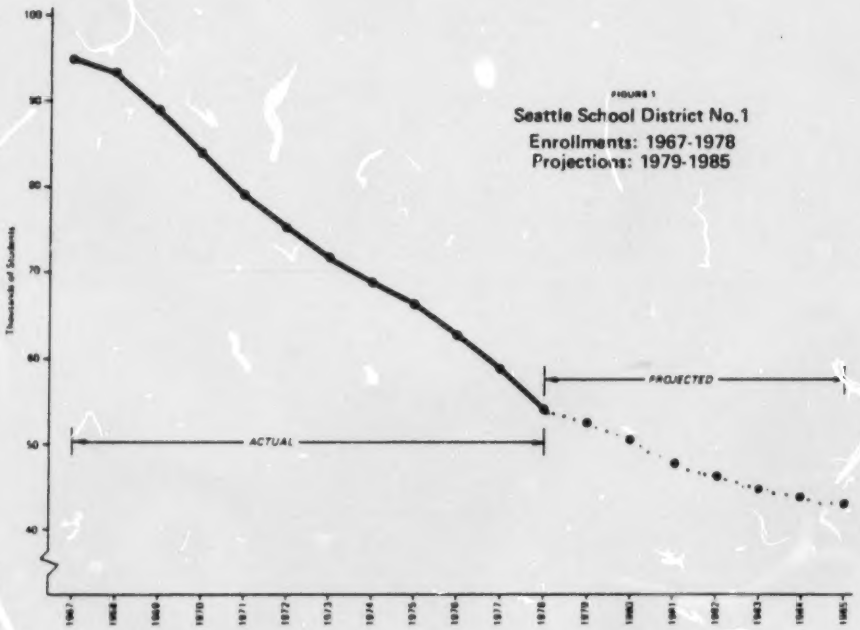
DECLINING ENROLLMENTS--RISING PROBLEMS

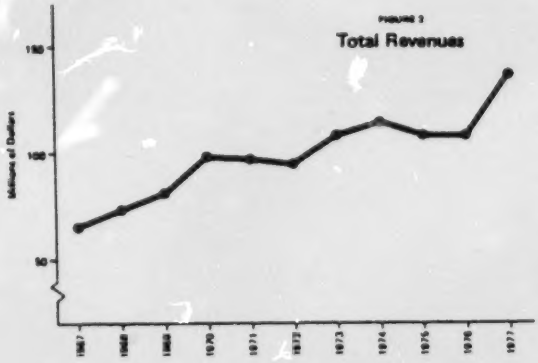
The Seattle School District, like other districts around the country, has experienced a steady enrollment decline over the last decade or more. In 1967-68, for example, enrollment in the District's schools totaled 95,245 students. In ten years, that figure had fallen to 58,925 (1977-78) and a further loss has been experienced since. In November 1978, total enrollment stood at 54,160. A graph of student enrollments over the period, and projections[1] into 1985 is given in Figure 1.



[1]Source: Beanblossom, Gary, Demographic and Socioeconomic Profiles of the Seattle School District, Seattle Public Schools 1976, p. 65.

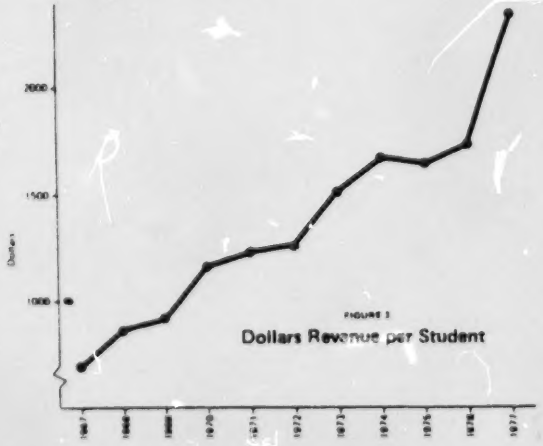
Enrollments fall, budget rises

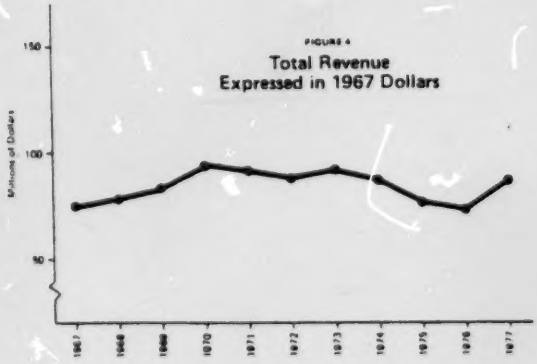
Persons who noted a 38% reduction in numbers of students during the decade 1967-1977 may have been disappointed when they looked at school budgets for corresponding decreases. Total revenues for the Seattle School District over the years 1967-1977 are shown in Figure 2. ("1967" means 1967-1968).



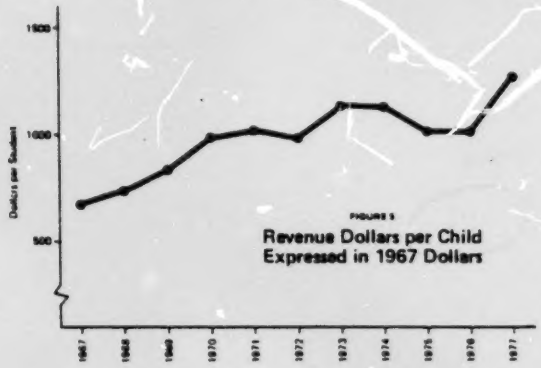
The period began with a revenue total of $66.3 million, money actually received during 1967-1968. In 1977-78, $137.5 million in revenues were received, a gain of 107%! While student numbers fell off by nearly 2/5, revenue dollars received more than doubled. The effects of inflation will be considered in a moment, but one of the questions that surfaces is: What were the corresponding numbers of revenue dollars per student?

The growth of the District's financial ability per student is shown in Figure 3. In 1967, the District received, in revenues, an average of $696.10 per child. In 1977, the figure was $2,333.47, or more than 3-1/3 times that in 1967. During the interval, the U.S. Consumer Price Index, a widely accepted measure of inflation, rose from 101.0 (Oct. 1967) to 184.5 (Oct. 1977). Revenues for the decade 1967-1977 were adjusted to 1967 dollar values, and presented in Figure 4. Even under this scale, the steady growth from 1967-1970 indicates revenue expansion with respect to the general economy. The decline beginning in 1970 lagged, as tax revenues frequently do, behind the slump experienced in the local economy. Fluctuations between 1970 and 1977 occurred, including a major drop (1975 to 1976) following the levy failure of 1975.



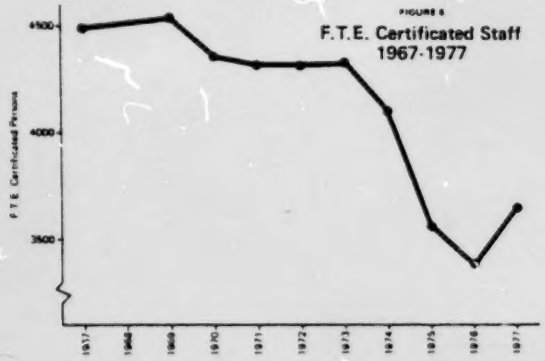


The number of revenue dollars backing each child enrolled in the District measured in 1967 dollars is shown in Figure 5. In the previous paragraph, reference was made to the steady growth in revenues between 1967-70. That growth is also reflected in Figure 5. In Figure 4, (revenue measured in 1967 dollars) a downward trend with fluctuations was seen since 1970. In Figure 5, (revenue dollars per child measured in 1967 dollars), the trend is upward, with the corresponding fluctuations. Thus, even when total revenues and revenue dollars per child are expressed in 1967 dollars, it is clear that the number of dollars per child is increasing.

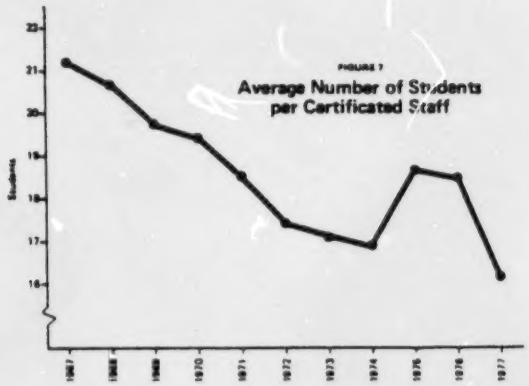


Staff decline lags behind student decline

Since the largest expenditure item in the budget goes to pay staff salaries and benefits, it may be worthwhile to consider whether cutbacks in staff have been made to keep up with the enrollment decline. In fact, the number of staff members has been generally declining since 1967, but not as fast as student numbers. The number of certificated staff (teachers, principals, counselors, area administrators) is shown for the period 1967-1977 in Figure 6. The notable drop of 1975 was due, of course, to the levy failure. However, by 1976, the actual numbers were apparently back on the trend line established in 1971, 1972, and 1973. In 1967, there were approximately 4,500 certificated staff, and in 1977, about 3,500.



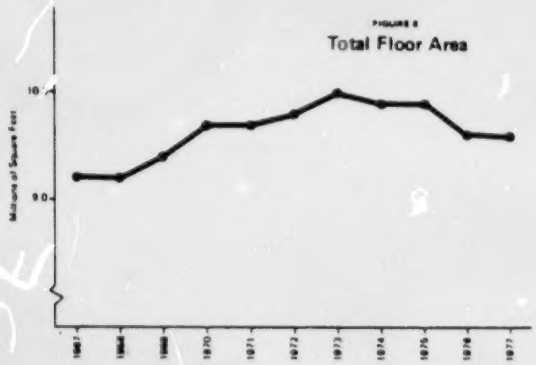
Such a reduction (about one hundred fewer "certs" each year subtained over ten years) was drastic. Did teachers have to deal, on an average, with more pupils per teacher? While the data shown in Figure 7 do not directly answer this question, since other personnel than teachers are included, yet the answer is clear. In 1967, there were about 21.2 students per certificated person, and in 1977, about 16.2. The hump shown in Figure 7, indicating a rise in 1975 to about 18.5 students per certificated person, was an effect of the levy loss experienced earlier that year. By 1977, the trend line has been re-established on the same downward continuing course exhibited in 1974 and earlier.



Total floor area

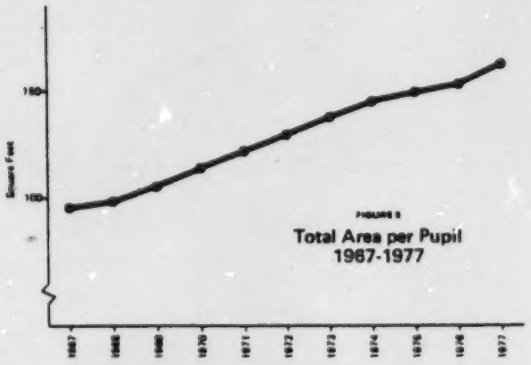
In 1946-47, enrollments in the Seattle Schools numbered 54,022, about that of October, 1978, when the enrollment was 54,178. In the 32-year interval, enrollments climbed to more than 100,000, including the Adult Vocational School. It was necessary to add a number of school buildings to house that growing population. Distances students were required to walk decreased, but street traffic nevertheless increased. Peak enrollments were reached in 1962. Since that time, the decline in student numbers has been continuous. Since the time of peak enrollment, some buildings have been declared surplus, and alternative use has been found for others.

The physical plant of the Seattle School District has included between nine and ten million square feet of floor space of all kinds: classrooms, corridors, portables, workshops, offices, kitchens, warehouse and other storage, both instructional and non-instructional space. The total floor area has varied as buildings have been added to and subtracted from the District space inventory. Figure 8 shows this variation. Starting at about 9.2 million square feet in 1967, a generally upward trend continued until 1973, when the figure reached 10 million square feet. The figure in 1977 was 9.6 million square feet.



The amount of floor space has not been reduced to keep pace with the decreasing number of students. Floor space has increased 4.3 percent at the same time (1967-1977) that students have decreased in number by 38.8%.

Figure 9 indicates the steady, unrelenting rise in total area per pupil during the period 1967-1977. In 1967, there were available an average of 96.6 square feet per student, and in 1977, 162.9 square feet per student. These numbers were found by dividing the total floor space of all District property by the number of students. The figure includes more than instructional space, and thus is not comparable to District space standards.



Thus, the period from 1967-1977 is characterized by falling enrollments, rising or nearly stable revenues, decreasing ratios of children to teachers, and increasing ratios of floor space per child.

Lest the reader conclude hastily from this recitation that the District is behaving like a ship without a rudder, a brief reference to changes in social conditions during the period should be made. The period marks fundamental changes in society. The civil rights movement, anti-war protests, the end of the Viet Nam war, student activism in the universities and colleges, changes in dress and hair styles and in basic living patterns characterized the times. Drugs became a problem. Cities experienced growth in numbers of minorities and disadvantaged persons. Social unrest was accompanied by an increasing dropout rate. Legal requirements imposed upon the District by the Courts compelled the adoption of or additions to programs in desegregation, special education, and other areas. Programs were instituted to meet the needs of dropouts and potential dropouts. Resources were allocated to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. As the diversity of the student body increased, the number and kinds of special programs was accordingly diversified.

Expectations for the future

Legislation limiting the size of levies and the assumption of a larger proportion of the costs of education by the state has stabilized revenues. It was noted earlier that actual revenues received in 1977-78 were $137.5 million. By contrast, revenues projected officially (calculated from known sources) were anticipated at $146 million for 1978-79. For 1979-80, that figure was $152 million. Sources of money in the revenue projections include the state apportionment, the local levy, and all categorical funds.

Basic Education Act

Following the levy failure of 1975, the Seattle School District sued the State of Washington, asking for "full funding of the costs of basic education," citing the State's constitutional duty to do this. The court, in its findings, directed the state legislature (1) to define the term "basic education," and (2) to fund the full costs of "basic education."

The basic education law (even now undergoing revision in the legislature) defines basic education, and seeks to fund it from state monies, at the same time putting a lid on local school levies. Writing, reading, and arithmetic (as one might expect) are part of the basic education program. Music, band, art, foreign language, on the other hand are not, at this moment. The legislature expects districts that wish to have these 'non-basics' fund them from local levies, but the levies will be limited to 10% of the total operating budget. Moreover, "basic education" is not yet fully funded by the State. One hundred percent funding of basic education is scheduled for 1980-81.

The basic education law also prescribes basic program offerings and length of school day. The prescribed length of the school day varies from 2.5 hours for Kindergarten to 6 hours for grades 9-12. The distribution formula prescribes permissible ratios of students to certificated and classified staff.

Necessary considerations in reducing expenditures

As School Boards, Administrators and Citizens examine school programs and consider ways to reduce spending, they are usually led to a few basic considerations. Schools are organized to deliver education to groups of children, since it obviously costs less to teach children in groups than to teach them separately.

In a period of declining enrollment, however, this has important implications about finding the likely spots in the budget where cutting can occur. When one child withdraws from school, for example, only very small cuts can be made. Supplies and materials no longer need be purchased for that child, for example, and a hot lunch does not require preparation. But the lunch program continues with the main costs unchanged, and classroom expenses have not been lowered.

Since we organize educational programs according to age (grade), neighborhood and subject matter, even though substantial percentages of children withdraw from school, it is not likely to result in reduced costs *unless the program can be reorganized across these same variables: age, neighborhood, or subject matter.*

For example, if thirty children were to withdraw from a school, uniformly distributed over the K-6 enrollment, there would be about four or five children per grade fewer than before. The probability is that staff cuts would not be possible. However, if all thirty had withdrawn from, say, the third grade, one fewer third grade teacher would be needed. Similarly, if only mathematics students were to withdraw, there would be fewer mathematics classes needed, and budget cuts would be possible. However, students in the Seattle Schools are not exclusively "mathematics" students, and it is not likely that budget cuts can be made by anticipating reductions of student numbers in isolated basic subject matter areas.

Schools are organized, as previously noted, by age (grade), attendance area, or subject matter area. In order to take full advantage of the reduced costs made possible by the current reductions in student numbers, *it is clear that the necessary reorganization must be across attendance areas.* This implies school closures, in some instances. For the arithmetic of cost reduction requires that students be grouped in clusters of suitable size, for economy as well as quality of instruction. This means that elementary school classrooms, to be economical, must not be dropped below, for example, 25 students.

All over the city, however, enrollments are falling, and class sizes below that figure are common. When class sizes fall, most children enjoy, and their parents appreciate, the extra attention that is available to the child. Make no mistake, however; that extra attention is costly.

Attempts by the School Board to close schools have been resisted for a number of reasons. Children would have to walk farther to school, if schools were closed, and other significant changes in living patterns would have to be made.

The District has simply spread its resources too thinly. Fewer students and fewer staff located in the same buildings mean less education. Legislation already on the books indicates that such closures will become inevitable. The Basic Education Law, which shortly will fully fund basic education, and trends clearly visible in appropriations for public education from the state legislature strongly suggest that the Seattle School District will be compelled to reduce the numbers of its staff, and (since it will not be feasible to do otherwise) to reduce the number of its school buildings. In this way, children will be gathered together in sufficient numbers and in appropriate groupings by grade level and by subject matter so that they can be taught efficiently and economically.